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NB Human Rights Commission

Op-Editorial / Greater vigilance needed to counter hate crime (01/07/20)

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FREDERICTON (CNB) - The following op-editorial by N.B. Human Rights Commission Chairman Patrick Malcolmson discusses hate crimes and is considered timely following the recent cross-burning incident in the Moncton area.

by Patrick Malcolmson

N.B. Human Rights Commission

Perhaps what we most need to recognize about the appalling incident of cross-burning in Moncton this past week is the extent to which crimes of hate harm both the individuals involved and our political community as a whole.

The direct harm done to the victims is enormous. Imagine yourself coming home one evening and finding a swastika spray painted on your door; or going to a family member's grave site to find it desecrated because of your religion, colour or ethnic origin. Your life would be forever changed by such an event, and your feeling of being a part of a community would be deeply shaken.

Consider the extent to which hate crimes are crimes against the whole community. We all feel ashamed this could happen here. It violates a cardinal tenet of our view of justice: that we do not judge people on the basis of things that are essentially private human matters, such as religious belief, sexual orientation or marriage. Human beings are equally human beings, regardless of sex, colour, race, physical or mental disability, place of origin, ancestry or age. It is precisely this fact that provides the foundation for our "human" rights to be treated in a way that does not discriminate on these grounds.

Hate crimes attack the security, dignity and personal well being of the victims, and also undermine the collective sense of dignity of a political community. It is for this reason that hate crimes are now accorded a different status from other types of crimes by both police and the courts.

An ordinary act of vandalism is terrible, but the harm caused by hate crimes is much worse and reverberates throughout an entire community. Hate crimes violate the spirit of our international persona as Canadians, and they make a mockery of the pride we take in being a champion of human rights on the world stage.

Hate crimes violate the core principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in fact presenting

a direct affront to its very first article: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." They also violate the basic tenets of the Canadian Constitution, Charter of Rights and Freedoms, as well as every Human Rights Act across the country. They are a direct violation of the Criminal Code of Canada, and as a result of sentencing reforms in 1995, judges are required to impose stiffer sentences for these crimes.

What about the impending fate of those who committed this most recent criminal act? Not only do we need to consider whether the sentence is time in jail, or not, we must also address how this person's character has taken shape, and what motivates people to commit this type of crime. How does a person develop such hatred and irrational prejudice?

Research, in Canada and the United States, shows that most hate crimes are committed by young people. Most often, they are not part of any organized group. Do these people realize what they are doing? Are they induced by the hate propagated by others?

Educating young people about human rights and the respect for an individual's dignity is a process that begins each and every day. The youth of our society, like tender plants, must be loved and nurtured constantly, lest our garden turn to weeds. Greater vigilance must be used against any organized group that encourages people -- young or old -- to commit such heinous acts.

The New Brunswick Human Rights Commission is wholly committed to this task of education and supports the efforts of all New Brunswickers, particularly those of Anti-Racist Action youth groups, who are working to promote human dignity and respect for human rights.

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